

Inside, Outside, All the Same

There's a true story about an event in the year 1968 in a third grade classroom in Iowa shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Wondering how to teach her young pupils about the effects of discrimination, the teacher designed an exercise perhaps best recalled as *Blue Eyes / Brown Eyes*¹. One morning as the students entered the classroom, she asked them to separate into two groups according to whether their eyes were coloured *blue* or *brown*. She instructed the blue-eyed kids to wear green armbands, telling the class that the brown eyed people were the *better* people in the room, and that they were cleaner and smarter. She invented a reason that this was so – namely that the colours of one's eyes, hair and skin were caused by a specific chemical that also causes intelligence. She concluded that the darker the colours of these attributes, the more intelligence there was in the brown-eyed students. She went on to making disparaging remarks about the blue-eyed students, and she could feel a widening gulf between the two groups. A few days later, she reversed the exercise, saying that it was actually the *blue-eyed* students who were superior, and began saying disparaging things about the *brown-eyed* ones. Her exercise culminated with a sharing of the feelings her students felt, especially when they were in the group labelled as less worthy, simply because of an attribute they could not control, in this case, the *colour of their eyes*. While the teacher received some criticism for this experiment, she stated that she saw it as a meaningful tool in helping her students understand the reality of discrimination and bias. I wish I had thought of an exercise such as this when I was a teacher.

¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/lesson-of-a-lifetime-72754306/>

As humans, we all have biases, and many of them are quite innocuous. Preference for certain colours influence many of our purchases of clothing, room décor and automobiles. Preference for certain foods dictates our diets. Preferences for certain types of movies determines which shows we will or won't go to see. For preferences such as these, our biases are often *conscious* ones and don't necessarily interfere in our lives or those of others. But our biases can also lead us to form pre-judgments of people and situations and can thus limit the richness of new experiences. When my wife and I were engaged, we had a conversation about foods, and she mentioned that she liked carrot cake. I stated that while I had never tried it, I couldn't imagine eating any type of dessert that had vegetables in it. Well, I was at her family home for dinner one night and enjoyed a piece of cake for dessert. She asked me how I liked it, and I replied that it tasted quite good, whereby she said 'that's carrot cake!' And so I learned that I had been dismissing an experience based on a bias, and it actually opened me up to more flexibility in trying different foods on occasion.

But, as humans, we are also influenced to some degree by what is called *unconscious bias*, whereby our thoughts, feelings and actions can *influence and even control* our behaviour in a way we might not behave if we were aware of their roots. 'Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences'². All of us have unconscious biases. Some research suggests that 'a few of our unconscious biases come from our direct experiences (with other people, events, situations, etc.).[but that] the majority of our biases (both positive

² <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/ldc/researchers/opportunities/development>

and negative) are based on vicarious experiences - those relayed to us through stories, books, movies and other people.³ All the more reason to be careful about what we say in front of our children and grandchildren.

Human living will always involve our forming perceptions and misperceptions about other people. While some of these are indeed based in our life experiences with individuals, some will be based on our biases toward groups within our society. The 1970's TV show *All in the Family* brought our naïve prejudices to light and even laughter through the portrayal of *Archie Bunker*, the bigot that many viewers loved. While his views were terribly off the mark as shown by the reactions of all those around him, they also represented uneasy truths about how our society viewed minorities. The show helped us to laugh at our own ridiculous prejudices with the hope that we would move beyond them. Comedian Don Rickles had the same intentions with his routines of mocking anyone and everyone of any culture or religion, including his own. And while portrayals such as these helped us laugh at our own foibles, did they really move us toward a more inclusive society? Or does it take more?

According to the Old Testament, in the world that Jesus lived, the Jewish community prevailed. Their religion spoke of a King that would come to bless and save them, but when Jesus showed up wearing sandals and a cloth robe, they rejected him. Their prejudice about how a King should look caused them to reject Jesus as an impostor. But before we pass judgment on them, we must look at how we welcome people who differ from our norms. And the best example for this is the life of Jesus. Jesus lived his life in a way that nobody was ever excluded. He

³ www.huffingtonpost.com/trudy-bourgeois/unconscious-bias-it-start

sided with the oppressed and poor, not in spite of their raw humanity, but because of it.

The human spirit of unquestioned compassion is often, though perhaps unfortunately, seen in times of tragedy. Horrific episodes such as the Boston Marathon bombing, and just this past week, the inexplicable murder of innocent people on a Toronto street, showed the true power of human compassion and strength. Countless people ran toward the victims offering human support and encouragement. They didn't ask the victims what religion they practiced. They didn't ask what country they were born in. They simply responded to their needs... one human being to another. They simply lived out the example of the *Good Samaritan* (as we heard in our scripture reading.) These examples are completely in line with the life and teachings of Jesus. He didn't have a formal religion, but instead demonstrated a life of compassion for all people. He offered healing to the oppressed and downtrodden against the arrogant rulers of the day, even though it would eventually cost him his life.

But today, it's easy and commonplace for us to express our biases toward minorities. We get frustrated with foreign-speaking agents when we are seeking solutions to technical problems with our computers or smart phones. But if we, for even a moment, put ourselves in their place, trying to communicate technical issues with someone who doesn't clearly understand our language, perhaps we can ease up and be more patient. And for us here in Windsor-Essex, the mosaic of our community offers a beautiful environment in which to live and appreciate our diversity in the light of togetherness. While these terms may seem to be opposite in meaning, they can also be seen as an intertwining of our human threads, binding us with each other in a deeper spiritual sense. Multicultural events and festivities allow us the opportunity to experience and appreciate something different from

what we know. We're all human. We all face similar life issues. We all have more in common than we are different.

The recent episode in the U.S of two black men being arrested for so-called loitering inside a coffee shop drew worldwide attention. It has led to the corporate headquarters conducting a nation- wide seminar on *cultural bias* for its employees. But some would question whether the proposed half-day seminar can really bring about change so quickly in uncovering the biases of the employees as well as re-visiting the overall protocol of the restaurant chain.⁴ And so it is for us, as a community and as individuals. While we have made progress toward a society where race, culture and sexual identity should not be factors in life and liberty, we must continue to ensure that differences from our perceived cultural norms give way to a culture that embraces differences. What we all have in common is that we're all different and unique in many ways. How boring our world would be if we were all the same. Our differences are truly the blessings that unite us. So let's celebrate them!

Show video – Everything is Beautiful by Ray Stevens.

Brian Stocks. Westminster United Church. April 29, 2018

⁴ <http://www.workforce.com/2018/04/18/starbucks-implement-unconscious-bias-training>